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Conflicts and conflict management styles as precursors of workplace bullying: A two-wave longitudinal study

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The current study examined the relationships between conflicts in the work unit, the employee's conflict management style and workplace bullying in a full panel two-wave longitudinal design with a 6 months' time lag ($n = 277$). We assumed that conflicts as well as the conflict management styles of "problem solving" and "forcing" at T1 would predict being a target or a perpetrator of bullying at T2. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) showed that a normal causation model fitted our data best. In this model, forcing at T1 related positively and problem solving at T1 related negatively to being a perpetrator at T2; in line with our expectations. In contrast to our hypotheses, this model showed that conflicts in the work unit at T1 and the conflict management styles at T1 were not related to being a target of bullying at T2. These results underline that problem solving and forcing may be regarded as triggers of workplace bullying. They particularly influence being a perpetrator and not being a target of bullying.

Keywords: Bullying; Conflict management styles; Longitudinal study; Mobbing.

An exponential increase of publications in work and organizational psychology have focused on workplace bullying; a form of counterproductive work behaviour that has been linked to a range of detrimental outcomes for targets, observers, and the organization as a whole (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Rodriguez-Muñoz, Baillien, De Witte, Moreno-Jiménez, & Pastor, 2009). Despite valuable indications that workplace bullying may be triggered by conflicts, few studies to date have unravelled this issue in more detail. Specifically, incident-based models drawing on qualitative studies including perspectives of targets and key informants underlined that the occurrence and management of conflicts at work may create a breeding ground for becoming a target or a perpetrator of bullying (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2009; Leymann, 1996). This proposition was quantitatively confirmed for targets in a range of cross-sectional studies (Agervold, 2009; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Vartia, 1996; Zapf, 1999). Three studies moreover specified which particular reactions from the employee confronted with conflict

associated with bullying. Their findings linked conflict management to being a target of bullying through low scores on "productive" and high scores on "destructive" conflict management styles (Ayoko, Callan, & Härtel, 2003; Baillien & De Witte, 2009). The current study aims to advance this line of research by investigating the lagged relationships between conflicts in the work unit, the employee's conflict management styles defined in line with the Dual Concern framework (De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997), and bullying, using a two-wave longitudinal design. In addition, we try to extend current findings to bullying enactment by including both targets and perpetrators of bullying.

WORKPLACE BULLYING

Workplace bullying refers to a long-term process (i.e., minimum 6 months) in which minor negative acts accumulate to a pattern of systematic maltreatment (Notelaers, Einarsen, De Witte, & Vermunt, 2006; Salin, 2008). These acts may concern work-related

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(e.g., withholding information) or personal issues (e.g., gossiping, social isolation). They may harm the target's health and well-being (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002), and may affect the target's attitudes and behaviour in terms of, for example, job satisfaction, commitment, intention to leave, and absenteeism (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2004; Rodriguez-Muñoz et al., 2009). Whereas earlier studies on workplace bullying distinguished this concept from "mobbing" in which a target was belittled by a "mob" or a group of coworkers, scholars recently agreed that both phenomena may be regarded as synonyms (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). Workplace bullying is generally assessed by means of two approaches (Nielsen, 2009). In the first approach, respondents indicate how often they have been subjected to workplace bullying based on a definition. In the second approach, respondents indicate how often they experienced each of a list of bullying behaviours. The current study follows many other scholars in the workplace bullying research domain by applying the second, behavioural, approach (see Nielsen, 2009). As such, we will focus on being a target or being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours.

Although some scholars considered bullying as a subset of conflicts (De Dreu, Emans, Euwema, & Steensma, 2001) or as an extreme form of (relational) conflict (De Dreu, Van Dierendonck, & Dijkstra, 2004), this vision is not shared by scholars in the workplace bullying research domain. They underline that equating bullying with conflict underestimates its unethical and counterproductive nature (e.g., Keashly & Nowell, 2003; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010), an idea that has been supported by five arguments. First, bullying typically includes a power imbalance between the parties involved: Targets often experience problems to defend themselves against the negative acts (Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Leymann, 1996) and are gradually stigmatized into an inferior position (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Stigmatization is not a defining characteristic of conflict (e.g., Jehn, 1995). Second, bullying is by definition longstanding and refers to the outcome of a subsequent number of episodes in which negative acts escalate over time (Einarsen et al., 1994; Olweus, 1991). Conflicts, in contrast, may be short as well as longstanding. They may include a single episode (for instance, unclear procedures are clarified as soon as it is seen that they cause a misunderstanding) or a series of episodes (for instance, a long-lasting discussion between two employees regarding who is responsible for a certain task). Third, workplace bullying has a clearly negative connotation, which is reflected in systematically directing negative acts towards a specific employee. Conflicts do not necessarily yield a negative connotation (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus,

2006; Thomas, 1992). Fourth, bullying contains an actual or by the victim perceived intention to cause harm (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997), which is not an essential element of conflicts. And last, in contrast to conflict that arises as soon as one party feels obstructed or irritated by another party (Van de Vliert, 1997), bullying explicitly refers to the observation or enactment of actual behaviour.

Building on the conceptual difference between conflict and workplace bullying, research explored their association both in incident-based models and using quantitative data. Drawing on the analyses of bullying incidents, scholars have developed models describing conflicts as an important trigger of workplace bullying. Elaborating on insights from targets, these models attribute bullying to unresolved conflicts. In these unresolved conflicts the parties involved particularly focus on each other's differences (Glasl, 1982, 1994; Zapf & Gross, 2001), and the weaker party is gradually stigmatized in his or her role as a target (Leymann, 1996). Recently, based on bullying incidents elaborated by key informants such as union representatives and human resource managers, Baillien and colleagues (2009) developed a Three Way Model that advances the earlier models in three ways. First, it further specifies the meaning of unresolved conflicts by defining two conflict components that may lead to bullying in general (i.e., both being a target and being a perpetrator): the occurrence of conflicts at work and the way conflicts are managed by the parties involved (their conflict management styles). Second, the Three Way Model distinguishes between effects of conflict management styles in relation to bullying in general. It elaborates that some conflict management styles will prevent bullying, whereas others will lead to bullying. Third, the model describes in more detail the mechanism that leads an employee to become a target versus a perpetrator of bullying. This mechanism applies to the situation in which the employee adopts a specific conflict management style and relates to the amount of power he/she claims in the conflict situation. In this context, making a powerful stance in the conflict (e.g., not giving in and aiming to win the fight) will lead to being a perpetrator of bullying. In contrast, doing little effort to claim victory will then encourage being a target of bullying.

WORKPLACE BULLYING AND THE OCCURRENCE OF CONFLICTS

In line with qualitative findings, also quantitative studies successfully revealed that workplace bullying may be triggered by the occurrence of conflicts at work. Presented with a list of possible triggers of bullying, unresolved conflicts belonged to the top five

most indicated causes of bullying from the target's perspective (Zapf, 1999). Targets of bullying perceived more conflicts than nonvictims. Likewise, departments with many bullying incidents showed a poorer social climate with more conflicts as compared to departments with few bullying incidents (Ager-vold, 2009). Similarly, investigating the relative strength of a broad range of organizational antecedents of bullying (i.e., job stressors, leadership behaviour, and organizational climate), interpersonal conflicts proved to be one of the strongest predictors of being a target of bullying (Hauge et al., 2007). These results align with Ayoko and colleagues (2003) who, by means of a multimethod approach, found that conflict incidents successfully predicted workplace bullying; and with Baillien and De Witte (2009), who observed that bullying among Belgian employees was predicted by a high number of conflicts in the team.

Although valuable in gaining insight in the relationship between conflicts and bullying, these studies show two limitations. First, studies so far have relied on cross-sectional designs and cannot draw conclusions regarding causality. Second, these studies have generally adopted a target perspective (Einarsen, 1999) and do not shed light on the perpetrator's side. The current study wants to address these issues by (1) using a two-wave cross-lagged design and (2) including reports from targets as well as perpetrators of bullying behaviours. Given earlier qualitative and quantitative findings, we assume that the occurrence of conflicts in the employee's direct work environment will predict later exposure to bullying behaviours. We focus particularly on conflicts in the own work unit as, for most employees, the interdependence between colleagues is highest in the own work unit. As a consequence, most conflicts appear in the context of the work unit (Greer, 2008; Jehn & Rispens, 2009), and research has revealed negative consequences of conflicts in the work unit in view of health and well-being (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008) and in view of (exposure to) negative behaviour (Glasl, 1982). With regards to targets, we therefore assume (i.e., replicating earlier cross-sectional findings):

Hypothesis 1a: The occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 relates positively to being a target of bullying behaviours at T2.

According to the Three Way Model (Baillien et al., 2009), conflicts may not only result in being a target of bullying behaviours, but could also be a breeding ground of bullying enactment by perpetrators. We follow this idea and therefore expect a similar relationship between conflicts in the work unit and being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours:

Hypothesis 1b: The occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 relates positively to being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours at T2.

WORKPLACE BULLYING AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

As with qualitative studies, quantitative findings revealed that workplace bullying may also be triggered by the way conflicts are managed by the employees involved. Earlier observations in this respect showed that at workplaces with many bullying incidents, differences in opinion were mostly settled by forcing or by taking advantage of one's position of authority (Vartia, 1996). At bullying-free workplaces, differences were usually managed by open communication (Vartia, 1996). Investigating conflict management at work, Ayoko and colleagues (2003) found that productive reactions to conflicts (i.e., solving the conflict) related to a decrease in bullying, whereas destructive reactions to conflicts (i.e., struggling for power and not working towards a solution) encouraged bullying. In a study focusing on conflict management styles within the team, exposure to bullying was predicted by a high tendency in the team to use a forcing conflict management style and by a low tendency in the team to apply a problem-solving conflict management style (Baillien & De Witte, 2009). In sum, several studies have detected reactions to conflict that may encourage or discourage bullying, albeit exclusively from the target's perspective. According to the Three Way Model (Baillien et al., 2009), however, conflict management may also be linked to being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours; this is an aspect we would like to add to this study.

In our current study, we particularly focus on the two more "assertive" conflict management styles of the four conflict styles defined in the Dual Concern Model: problem solving and forcing (Giebels & Euwema, 2010; Rahim, 1992; Van de Vliert, 1997). These styles both include a high concern for one's own goals (Van de Vliert, 1997) and reflect active reactions to conflict. Therefore, these styles may be linked to both being a target and being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours in a rather straightforward way.

As defined by, amongst others, Van de Vliert (1997) and by De Dreu and colleagues (2000), problem solving reflects a genuine attention for one's own as well as for the opposite party's goals. This conflict management style includes a process of open negotiation in order to find a win-win solution. Forcing results from a high care for one's own goals and a low interest in the other party's goals, and

reflects the need to prevail at the expense of the opposite party. These two styles clearly contrast regarding their focus on the other party's interests. Consequently, we expect a clear difference in how these conflict management styles relate to being a target or a perpetrator of workplace bullying.

First, problem solving can be defined as a deescalative conflict management style: Empirical research showed that applying a more integrative style such as problem solving associated with long-term lower task conflict, reduced relationship conflict and reduced conflict stress (De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001; Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000). Problem solving is described as an active and agreeable management style that contributes to improved relations between the parties (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). Clearly, one may expect this conflict management style to be negatively related to a negative outcome such as workplace bullying. We expect a negative association between problem solving and being a target of bullying based on earlier findings in this respect (Baillien & De Witte, 2009). We also expect a negative association between problem solving and being a perpetrator of bullying, following the Three Way Model that links conflict both to targets and perpetrators (Baillien et al., 2009). As regards problem solving, we may thus hypothesize (with particularly Hypothesis 2a replicating earlier cross-sectional findings):

Hypothesis 2a: Problem solving at T1 relates negatively to being a target of bullying behaviours at T2.

Hypothesis 2b: Problem solving at T1 relates negatively to being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours at T2.

Second, the expected relationship between forcing and bullying may be formulated based on (1) its effect on conflict escalation and (2) its connection to power. In view of conflict escalation, although problem solving and forcing share the fact that parties achieve their goals in an assertive way (Van de Vliert, 1997), there is however a clear difference in terms of strategies. As such, these styles are generally described as respectively "cooperative versus competitive", or "moving towards versus moving against", and "agreeable versus nonagreeable" (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). These labels indicate that, in contrast to problem solving, forcing typically contributes to tensed relations and encourages conflict escalation in the long term (Euwema & Van Emmerik, 2007; Van de Vliert, Euwema, & Huisman, 1995). In view of power, research on power and conflict management linked forcing to both objective (e.g., the formal position one occupies) as well as subjective (e.g., the perceived amount of

power) power differences. Forcing is predominantly applied by the powerful party in the conflict (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006; Fitness, 2000; Van de Vliert et al. 1995). This reflects respectively approach (i.e., high power) versus inhibition (i.e., low power) tendencies (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). In contrast to the powerful party that is generally action oriented and feels secure because of (abundant) access to resources, the less powerful party often feels vulnerable and unable to change the situation. Therefore, forcing is more likely adopted by "powerful" employees and is unlikely to be used by employees in conflict that are or feel rather powerless. As elaborated in the Three Way Model (Baillien et al., 2009), conflict management styles reflecting power discourage being a target of bullying. With regards to perpetrators in contrast, powerful reactions to conflicts encourage bullying enactment. From this, we assume:

Hypothesis 3a: Forcing at T1 relates negatively to being a target of workplace bullying behaviours at T2.

Hypotheses 3b: Forcing at T1 relates positively to being a perpetrator of workplace bullying behaviours at T2.

Besides problem solving and forcing, the Dual Concern Model (Giebels & Euwema, 2010; Rahim, 1992; Van de Vliert, 1997) also defines two low-assertive conflict management styles: yielding and avoiding. How these styles may be related to being a target or a perpetrator of bullying behaviours seems to be more ambiguous. In fact, there is some indication that the use of avoiding and yielding may perhaps relate to being a target of bullying (Aquino, 2000). How these styles may be related to being a perpetrator is speculative, as evidence in terms of the effects of these conflict management styles is mixed. Whereas yielding as well as avoiding have been related to long term conflict escalation in some studies (Giebels & Euwema, 2010), other studies found that these styles associated with deescalation (Van Erp, Giebels, van der Zee, & van Duijn, 2011). For this reason, we will not formulate hypotheses regarding the low-assertive styles of yielding and avoiding. We will nevertheless add these styles to our analyses to control for their possible impact on workplace bullying over time, and to explore their relationship with being a target versus being a perpetrator.

METHOD

Sample

Procedure. Data were collected in November 2007 (T1) and in April 2008 (T2) in establishments

of two large organizations with headquarters in Belgium. The 6-month time lag was inspired by de Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, and Bongers (2004), who call for longitudinal studies with time lags shorter than 1 year. Applying a short temporal lag allowed us to test whether the occurrence of conflicts and the conflict management styles may impact on bullying on the short term.¹ The organizations were chosen based on expected variation in workplace bullying and possibilities for generalization to blue- and white-collar workers. In both organizations, access to the employees was facilitated by the Human Resource department. Participation was voluntary and the respondents were instructed to post their questionnaires in sealed envelopes directly to the authors' research department. To guarantee confidentiality, T1 and T2 responses were linked by means of anonymous codes provided by the respondents themselves.

The first organization, in which we sampled all 555 respondents from one establishment, belonged to the textile industry. The second organization, in which we sampled 1275 respondents in different establishments, provided financial services. Establishments were chosen based on company records of earlier bullying incidents. A total of 680 respondents ($n_{\text{Organization1}} = 179$; $n_{\text{Organization2}} = 501$) returned their questionnaire with a longitudinal code in the T1 survey (response rate = 37%). This response was satisfactory and within the range of response rates reported in earlier studies with organization-specific samples (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Of these respondents, 357 ($n_{\text{organization1}} = 79$; $n_{\text{organization2}} = 278$) participated in the T2 survey as well (response rate relative to T1 = 53%). Two factors may have influenced the response rate at T2. First, approximately a month before T2 data gathering, Organization 2 unexpectedly launched a work satisfaction survey that partly addressed the same employees as those selected for our study. Consequently, some employees may have chosen to participate in the satisfaction survey instead, or may have mistaken the satisfaction survey for the previously announced T2 measurement. Second, response rates in Organization 1 may have been affected by highly unfavourable economic prospects for the Belgian textile industry, which were communicated to the organization's employees during January 2008 and may have discouraged them to participate at T2. After eliminating respondents who changed jobs since T1 ($n = 25$) and who did not answer all crucial measures in our current study, we obtained a definitive

two-wave sample of 277 respondents ($n_{\text{Organization1}} = 59$; $n_{\text{Organization2}} = 218$).

Sample and drop-out. More male (62%) than female employees (38%) participated in our two-wave study. The sample's mean age was 42.45 years ($SD = 8.91$). White-collar workers dominated the sample (51%), followed by managers (38%). A logistic regression analysis tested if participation in the two waves versus drop-out after Wave 1 (1 = retention; 0 = drop-out) was predicted by age, gender (1 = male; 0 = female), blue-collar worker (0 = white-collar worker/management; 1 = blue-collar worker), management (0 = white-/blue-collar worker; 1 = management), organizational membership (0 = Organization 1; 1 = Organization 2), and all study variables at Time 1. Age, gender, blue-collar worker, management, and organizational membership were entered in Step 1. Occurrence of conflicts, the four conflict management styles (problem solving, forcing, avoiding, yielding), being a target of bullying behaviours and being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours were entered in Step 2. Chi-square was not significant for both Step 1, $\chi^2(5) = 3.03$, $p = .70$, and Step 2, $\chi^2(7) = 9.85$, $p = .20$. Participants of both waves did not differ in any of the variables under study, suggesting limited selection effects.

Measures. We adopted a complete panel design in which all variables were measured in both T1 and T2 (i.e., de Lange, De Witte, & Notelaers, 2008; Taris, 2000).

The occurrence of conflicts in the work unit was measured with one self-constructed item. Specifically, we presented a definition that, inspired by Pondy (1972), described conflict as "a difference of opinion, disagreement, confrontation, or quarrel between different members (among coworkers as well as between one or more coworkers and the supervisor) of the work unit". Based on this definition, the respondents had to rate how frequently they themselves and the other members of their work unit are generally confronted with conflicts at work. To make sure the respondents attributed the same meaning to the work unit, this concept was defined as "all employees performing their job under supervision of the same supervisor". The response categories ranged from 1 to 5: "almost never" (=1), "a couple of times a year" (=2), "a couple of times a month" (=3), "a couple of times a week" (=4), and "(almost) every day" (=5).

The Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH; De Dreu, Evers, et al., 2001; Van de Vliert, 1997) was used to investigate the employee's individual conflict management styles. Response categories ranged from "never" (1) to "almost always" (5). *Problem solving*

¹As, following the definition of bullying, the minimum period for workplace bullying to develop is 6 months (Leymann, 1996), a time lag shorter than 6 months is not appropriate.

contained four items, such as “I examine issues until we find a solution that really satisfies all parties involved” ($\alpha_{T1} = .83$; $\alpha_{T2} = .84$). *Forcing* was measured by means of four items such as “I aim at winning the conflict” ($\alpha_{T1} = .70$; $\alpha_{T2} = .70$). *Yielding* consisted of four items such as “I adapt to the other party’s goals and interests” ($\alpha_{T1} = .79$; $\alpha_{T2} = .85$). *Avoiding* was measured by three items such as “I try to avoid confrontation about differences” ($\alpha_{T1} = .74$; $\alpha_{T2} = .72$).

Being a target of bullying behaviours was measured by means of the nine-item Short Negative Acts Questionnaire (S-NAQ; Notelaers & Einarsen, 2008) that lists various negative acts which may be perceived as bullying when occurring on a regular basis. The items refer to personal (e.g., gossiping) as well as work-related bullying (e.g., being withheld information) and examine how often the respondent was exposed to a specific act during the last 6 months. The response categories varied from “never” (=1), to “now and then” (=2), “monthly” (=3), “weekly” (=4), and “daily” (=5). In line with the bullying literature, all items were included in one scale ($\alpha_{T1} = .76$; $\alpha_{T2} = .79$) (for a discussion, see Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; Nielsen et al., 2009).

Being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours was measured by means of the same nine items of the S-NAQ; however, it was slightly adapted to an active formulation (e.g., “withholding information”) (see Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011). Respondents rated how frequently during the last 6 months (1 = “never”; 5 = “daily”) they had engaged in each of the nine acts. Reliability was somewhat lower, though satisfactory for a newly developed scale ($\alpha_{T1} = .65$; $\alpha_{T2} = .68$) (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Finally, the questionnaire included the following control variables taken from T1 measurement: gender dummy coded as “male” (1 = male; 0 = female), age (in years), job status dummy coded as “blue-collar worker” (1 = blue-collar worker; 0 = white-collar worker/management) and “management” (1 = management; 0 = blue-/white-collar worker), and organizational membership as “Organization 2” (1 = Organization 2; 0 = Organization 1).

Analyses

Data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) in AMOS 19.0 (Arbuckle, 2007). Following the two-step approach procedure recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we first tested the measurement models by means of item-level confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) for the two measurement points separately. An asymptotic covariation matrix, which allows correction in case of violation of the bivariate normality assumption, was estimated. This is of particular interest for the highly

skewed bullying at work variable. The analyses revealed a satisfactory fit of a seven-factor (i.e., the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit, problem solving, forcing, yielding, avoiding, being a target of bullying behaviours, and being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours) measurement model at both T1, $\chi^2(471) = 636.92$, $p < .001$, RMR = .03, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .95, and T2, $\chi^2(476) = 691.19$, $p < .001$, RMR = .03, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .95. This seven-factor model showed a better fit as compared to the one-factor model, $\chi^2_{T1}(527) = 2143.64$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2_{T2}(527) = 2450.72$, $p < .001$, indicating that our self-reports are less likely to be biased by common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Then, we tested four competing models regarding the causal relationships between the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit, the conflict management styles and workplace bullying. The first model was the baseline or stability model (M1), which included temporal stabilities and synchronous (i.e., within-wave) effects of the variables over time, without any cross-lagged associations. Second, we tested the normal causation model (M2), which additionally included cross-lagged paths from conflict in the work unit at T1 and the four conflict management styles at T1 to being a target and being a perpetrator at T2. Third, the reversed causation model (M3) additionally included cross-lagged paths from being a target and being a perpetrator at T1 to conflicts in the work unit at T2 and the four conflict management styles at T2. Finally, in the reciprocal causation model (M4) we included both the cross-lagged paths from M2 and M3.

Particularly in small samples, carrying out estimates with a large number of variables may hold insufficient power or can lead to underidentification (Bentler & Chou, 1987). Therefore, we reduced the complexity of our SEM models by using manifest variables (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). The error terms of each indicator at T1 with the corresponding indicator at T2 were allowed to covary (Bollen, 1989). In addition, synchronous correlations between constructs in the same wave were allowed in all models (Rodriguez-Munoz et al., 2009). The control variables were used as a covariate in all SEM analyses. For reasons of parsimony, however, only the control variables that turned out to be significant predictors in preliminary hierarchical regression analyses were included. In these regression analyses, each study variable at T2 was regressed on the corresponding variable at T1 and the five control variables (i.e., age, male, blue-collar, management, and Organization 2). These analyses revealed significant associations between being male and conflicts in the work unit T2, between management and avoiding T2, and between Organization 2 and being a perpetrator at T2. Hence,

male, management, and Organization 2 were included as covariates in further analyses.

For each model, model fit was assessed using the chi-square test. As this test is sensitive to sample size (Hu & Bentler, 1995), we also reported the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Levels of .90 or higher for GFI, and .08 or lower for RMSEA indicated that the models fit the data reasonably well (Byrne, 2002). We compared different competing nested models by means of the chi-square difference test (Weston & Gore, 2006). Differences between models were also evaluated using the Akaike measure (AIC). As a rule of thumb, the model with the smallest AIC value is considered to be the best (Akaike, 1987). Moreover, AIC differences lower than 2 show little difference between the competing models, whereas differences higher than 4 show considerably more support for the model with the lowest AIC (Burnham & Anderson, 2002).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the means, the standard deviations, and the correlations between the T1 and T2 scales. This table reveals a number of interesting observations. First, the test-retest correlations of the variables under study ranged between .46 (for occurrence of conflicts) and .69 (for problem solving and for being a target of bullying behaviours), which aligns with other cross-lagged studies in the workplace bullying and conflict management domain with rather short time lags (e.g., Baillien et al., 2011; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990). Second, the occurrence of conflicts at T1 was positively related to being a target/perpetrator of bullying behaviours at T1. Problem solving was negatively related to being a target as well as being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours. Forcing associated positively with being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours, but was unrelated to being a target of bullying behaviours. Avoiding and yielding were not associated with being a target or being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours. Finally, note that problem solving associated positively with forcing—higher scores on problem solving were related to higher scores on forcing—and that avoiding correlated positively with yielding and negatively with problem solving (Cohen, 1988, 1992; Field, 2005), indicating that high scores on avoiding associated with high scores on yielding and low scores on problem solving.

Cross-lagged relationships

Table 2 displays the fit indices of the competing models, as well as the model comparisons. Results

show that the normal causation model (M_2) fitted our data best, particularly in terms of χ^2 and AIC.

Figure 1 shows all standardized cross-lagged effects observed in this model. Specifically, we found a significant effect of problem solving T1 and forcing T1 on being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours T2; in line with Hypotheses 2b and 3b. There was no cross-lagged effect from the occurrence of conflicts T1 on being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours T2; rejecting Hypotheses 1b. Also, we found no cross-lagged effects of the occurrence of conflicts T1, problem solving T1, and forcing T1 on being a target of bullying behaviours T2. Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a were all not confirmed. Additionally, the model revealed significant cross-lagged relationships between male and conflict in the work unit T2, $\beta = .11$, $p < .05$, between management and avoiding T2, $\beta = -.15$, $p < .001$, and between Organization 2 and being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours T2, $\beta = -.17$, $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The current study shows a clear relation over time between problem solving as well as forcing and being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours. This is the first study showing this causal relation. The results emphasize the important difference between these two styles, and add to the often mentioned benefits of problem solving, as well as the possible detrimental effects of forcing (De Dreu, Evers, et al., 2001).

A second interesting finding of our study is that the conflict components were only related to being a perpetrator and not to being a target of bullying behaviours over time. These findings seem to suggest that conflicts and the way they are handled may only be regarded as triggers for bullying enactment, and not for being a target of these negative acts. One possible explanation could be that the processes leading to being a target versus being a perpetrator of bullying may actually be different; an aspect that has been put forward by scholars in the field (Van den Broeck, Baillien, & De Witte, 2011). In this context, studies have successfully linked being a target of bullying to a stress process and indicated that employees worn out by either exposure to stressors or by having few resources may become easy targets for bullies. The link between stressors, resources, and being a perpetrator of bullying appeared less straightforward, which might indicate that other processes, such as conflicts and the way they are dealt with, may additionally trigger bullying enactment by future perpetrators. Our current study accordingly refines earlier studies that linked conflicts to being a target of bullying using cross-sectional data. Note, moreover, that our results further sustain the explanatory models applied in the workplace

TABLE 1
Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations for T1 and T2 (N = 277)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1. Age	42.45	8.91	—																		
2. Male	—	—	.14*	—																	
3. Blue-collar	—	—	-.01	.20**	—																
4. Management	—	—	.01*	.16*	-.27**	—															
5. Organization 2	—	—	.04	.07	.62**	-.17**	—														
6. Conflict T1	2.08	1.06	-.10	.01	.05	-.03	.03	—													
7. Conflict T2	2.06	0.96	-.09	.10	.04	-.02	.02	.46*	—												
8. Problem solving T1	3.81	0.69	.03	.12*	.26**	.32**	-.19**	-.06	-.10	(.83)											
9. Problem solving T2	3.77	0.67	.01	.12*	.21**	.30**	-.11	-.03	-.10	.69**	(.84)										
10. Forcing T1	2.69	0.61	-.14*	.13*	-.09	.13*	-.11*	.10	.03	.19**	.13*	(.70)									
11. Forcing T2	2.67	0.62	-.11	.13*	-.03	.04	-.05	.08	.06	.13*	.17**	.61**	(.70)								
12. Yielding T1	3.11	0.52	.14*	-.04	.13*	-.16**	-.02	-.14**	-.18**	.02	.03	-.08	-.16**	(.79)							
13. Yielding T2	3.14	0.51	.14*	.04	-.07	-.12*	.02	-.05	-.01	.01	.08	-.16**	-.18**	.63**	(.85)						
14. Avoiding T1	2.94	0.82	.06	-.07	.06	-.18**	.04	-.06	-.06	-.27**	-.31**	-.09	-.18**	.30**	.29**	(.74)					
15. Avoiding T2	2.96	0.84	.08	-.02	.06	-.27*	.12*	-.01	.06	-.26**	-.31**	-.14*	-.11	.28**	.40**	.63**	(.72)				
16. Target T1	1.35	0.33	-.06	.06	.14*	-.06	.03	.42**	.27**	-.26**	-.21**	.10	.06	-.11	-.04	.05	.05	(.76)			
17. Target T2	1.36	0.36	-.12*	.01	.19**	-.04	.09	.30**	.37**	-.22**	-.21**	.09	.03	-.07	-.06	.01	.09	.69**	(.79)		
18. Perpetrator T1	1.32	0.26	-.13*	.14*	.14*	-.06	-.04	.30**	.18**	-.20**	-.15*	.20**	.20**	-.10	-.09	.01	.01	.46**	.36**	(.65)	
19. Perpetrator T2	1.30	0.27	-.16*	.16*	.04	-.01	-.09	.21**	.24**	-.21**	-.17**	.21**	.25**	-.06	-.05	.04	.02	.45**	.58**	.65**	(.68)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Goodness-of-fit indices and models comparisons ($N = 177$)

Factor model	χ^2 (df)	p	GFI	RMSEA	AIC	Comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	ΔAIC
M1: Baseline or stability model	206.57 (84)	.000	.93	.07	344.69				
M2: Normal causation model	186.69 (74)	.000	.93	.07	344.16	M1–M2	19.88*	10	0.53
M3: Reversed causation model	196.98 (74)	.000	.93	.08	354.93	M1–M3	9.59	10	–10.77
M4: Reciprocal causation model	177.83 (64)	.000	.93	.08	355.82	M1–M4	28.74	20	–11.66
						M2–M4	8.86	10	–11.13
						M3–M4	19.15*	10	–0.89

* $p < .05$.

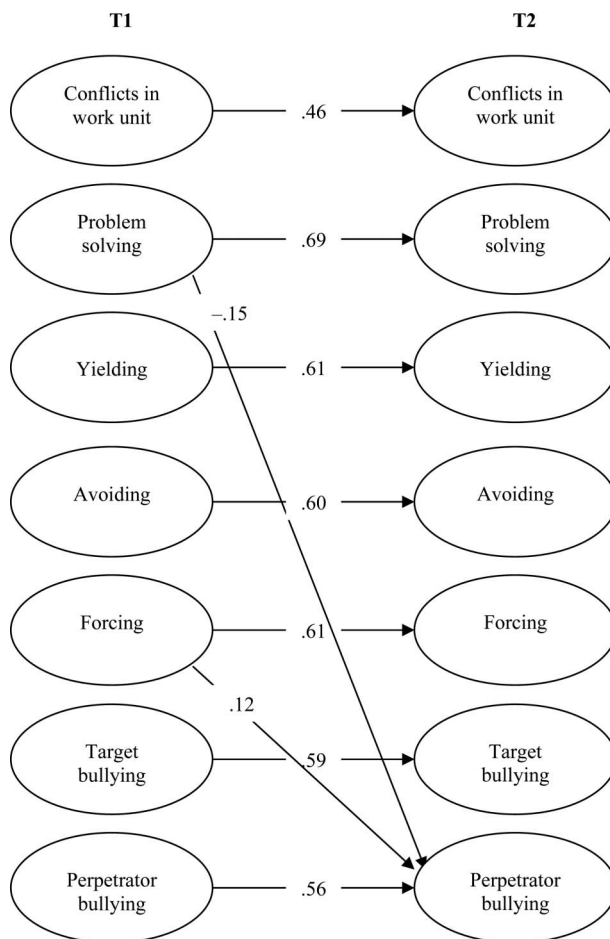


Figure 1. Simplified final structural model showing standardized lagged effects. All values are significant at $p < .001$, except lagged effect of forcing on perpetrator ($p < .01$).

bullying research domain, as the conflict components at T1 associated with bullying at T2, and not vice versa.

Problem solving is, however, negatively correlated with being a target both at T1 and T2. Although no longitudinal effect is found, this is an important indicator that problem solving indeed is related with healthy and cooperative conflict management, and prevents bullying in the workplace. This also aligns with the conflict literature, in which forcing often

results in more strained interpersonal relations, with threat of escalation, whereas problem solving contributes to improved relations (Giebels & Euwema, 2010), and thereby has a preventive effect for bullying.

As respects the specific conflict components, we should notice that there is a significant correlation between the occurrence of conflicts at work and bullying; both in terms of being a target and a perpetrator of bullying behaviours. However, our results did not reveal a significant association between the occurrence of conflicts at work and being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours over time. This is an intriguing finding, and illustrates probably the complex dynamics between conflict and bullying in the workplace. The correlations are in line with earlier research suggesting that higher base rates of conflicts in the work environment correspond with higher rates of workplace bullying (Zapf, 1999). One plausible explanation that we did not find a causal relation might be that conflicts and bullying may reinforce each other almost constantly (i.e., “destructive escalation”; Deutsch et al., 2006) or perhaps not in a linear causal way. Future studies may therefore apply daily or weekly diary designs or nonlinear methods to further disentangle the nature of the relationship between the occurrence of conflicts and workplace bullying. Another reason could perhaps be that only conflicts bearing a negative connotation may be linked to bullying over time, as they may elicit a process of frustrations and strains which in turn may escalate into bullying (Baillien et al., 2009; De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008). In line with the Revised Frustration Aggression Theory (Berkowitz, 1989), frustrations may cause bullying by (systematically) venting one’s negative emotions on a coworker, which leads to becoming a perpetrator of bullying. On the other hand, frustrations may encourage bullying as suggested by the Social Interactionist framework (Felson, 1992; Neuman & Baron, 2004). In this respect, frustrations may stimulate violation of social norms through a process of psychological dissociation (e.g., the frustrated employee makes more job-related mistakes or adopts

a more unfriendly attitude). Such employees may provoke negative reactions from colleagues as a form of retaliation, and may become a target of bullying. Third, the lack of a relationship between the occurrence of conflicts and bullying over time could be owed to the idea that bullying may perhaps be regarded as an extreme way of dealing with conflicts (i.e., a conflict management style) and the general observation in conflict research that conflict management styles moderate rather than mediate the relationships between conflict and its outcomes (e.g., Dijkstra, De Dreu, Evers, & van Dierendonck, 2009; Huang, 2009; Lui, Fu, & Liu, 2008). Fourth, our results may be explained by a lower “epistemic motivation”² of the most powerful party in the conflict, which leads this party to be less affected by the actual (work) context and to be more determined by their own goals and initiatives (De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003). Or, in view of being a perpetrator of bullying (i.e., the powerful position), the fact that there are conflicts at work may not be as decisive as for those who occupy a less powerful position.

Regarding the conflict management styles, we detected significant lagged main effects from problem solving and forcing and no lagged effects from avoiding and yielding on being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours. Whereas problem solving discouraged being a perpetrator over time, forcing encouraged this. In terms of the Dual Concern Theory, problem solving and forcing share their high concern for the own goals.³ Drawing on the current study’s overall results, this may imply that (only) conflict management styles that reflect a high concern for the self may relate to being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours. How these conflict management styles relate to being a perpetrator of bullying is then determined by the concern for the other party’s goals. Specifically, combined with a high concern for the other party (problem solving), the conflict management style discourages being a perpetrator of bullying. Combined with a low concern for the other party (forcing), the conflict management style encourages being a perpetrator of bullying. Future research may, however, benefit from a more explicit investigation of the link between the motives behind specific conflict behaviour and workplace bullying. Another interesting observation in this respect relates to yielding and avoiding, which are not associated with bullying over time. This is the first study to

explore the relationship between yielding and avoiding with workplace bullying over time, and it is remarkable that, for example, a cooperative style such as yielding did not discourage bullying.

Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that the current study has some drawbacks. A first limitation may concern the bullying concept and common method variance. More specifically, the bullying literature has paid a great deal of attention to the distinction between (dealing with) conflicts and bullying. Simultaneously, various researchers have defined workplace bullying as an escalated conflict (Baillien et al., 2009; Glasl, 1982; Leymann, 1996; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Therefore, it might be argued that conflicts in the work unit might include incidents of workplace bullying, an aspect that is of particular resonance in view of the fairly broad definition we used to measure conflicts in the work unit. Or, it could be reasoned that conflict management styles might reflect a form of bullying in an attempt to win the conflict, or conflict management styles such as forcing or problem solving could perhaps give feedback regarding the enactment of bullying. The confirmatory factor analysis, however, revealed that bullying, the occurrence of conflicts at work and the conflict management styles can be regarded as distinct latent factors. Future studies may, however, include more specific operationalization of conflict such as, for example, task versus personal conflicts (Jehn, 1995). A related issue concerns our self-report data that prevented us from separating method variance from true score variance. Yet we feel confident that common method variance did not strongly affect the importance of our findings. For a start, there is considerable debate about the magnitude of possible inflation of relationships owing to common method variance (Spector, 1987, 2006). Second, we relied on two-wave full panel data, which diminishes the risk for common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, we followed suggestions on questionnaire design that reduce potential risks associated with common method variance, such as anonymity and instructing the participants that there are no correct or wrong answers (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Fourth, CFA showed that the occurrence of conflicts, the conflict management styles, being a target of bullying behaviours, and being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours were not one but distinct latent factors. Nevertheless, future studies could strengthen the design used in this study by gathering multisource data.

A second limitation may refer to social desirability, which may have reduced the likelihood of obtaining accurate responses particularly in view of

²“Epistemic motivation” refers to the desire to develop and maintain an accurate understanding of situations. It determines whether individuals will engage in systematic and thorough information processing.

³Forcing combines a high concern for one’s own goals with a low concern for the opposite party’s goals; problem solving combines a high concern for one’s own goals with a high concern for the opposite party’s goals.

being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours. Our findings may therefore reflect the experiences of a subgroup of perpetrators willing to admit their negative conducts. In this sense, social desirability may imply an underestimation of effects due to a lack of variance. In other words, relationships may become even stronger when accounting for social desirability. Yet, to strengthen this research design, future research may benefit from objective measurements. Examples are including managerial reports or scores from a third party (e.g., researchers). Note, however, that assessing third party scores on workplace bullying without trying to counteract such behaviour raises ethical concerns, as workplace bullying yields many negative consequences for the parties involved as well as for the work unit and the organization (Einarsen et al., 2009).

A third limitation could be that our sample was not representative for the Belgian working population, which is for example reflected in a strong dominance of white-collar workers. A related issue concerns the nonresponse during T1 and T2 measurements, which may have hampered study's generalizability to similar organizations. Our sample was also rather small, yielding some limitations in view of statistical methods that could be applied such as, for example, distinguishing groups of nontargets/targets and nonperpetrators/perpetrators when addressing our hypotheses. Future research may therefore replicate our findings in more representative and bigger samples.

Fourth, the current study particularly builds on the one best way perspective regarding conflict management styles. In this view, distinct conflict management styles have a mutually exclusive influence on the conflict outcomes. As such, we look at the long-term effects of the separate conflict management styles. Yet, studies in the conflict management research domain revealed that effects towards escalation and deescalation may be time dependent (Van de Vliert, 1997) and could relate to adopting a specific combination (i.e., "conglomeration") of conflict management styles over time (Van de Vliert et al., 1995). One interesting avenue for future studies could then be to inspect the impact of different sequences of the conflict management styles over time (e.g., first forcing, then avoiding, then problem solving, etc.) on bullying.

And last, the current study explored the direct effect of the conflict management styles and did not account for dispositional or situational elements that may have influenced the conflict management styles' availability and effects (Keashly & Nowell, 2003). One situational factor that might play a role could be that the employees in conflict occupy a different hierarchical position in the organization; a factor we now controlled for in our analyses. In this respect,

research has indicated that employees occupying a position of authority are more inclined to apply powerful ways to manage conflicts (e.g., forcing and problem solving), whereas employees that do not have such a position tend to avoid or yield as they fear the potential consequences of not showing such behaviour towards their powerful opponent (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Fitness, 2000; Keltner et al., 2003; Van de Vliert et al., 1995). Investigating the adopted conflict management styles in dyads in which parties occupy different hierarchical positions and their effects on being a target versus perpetrator of bullying behaviours may therefore be an interesting avenue for future research. Similarly, studies could explore the effect of conflict management styles that do not align with the expected inrole behaviour in these dyads and investigate its potential impact on being a target versus a perpetrator of bullying behaviours.

CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The current study's implications are twofold. First, our results underline that being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours may be predicted by how employees deal with conflicts at work. Specifically, our findings revealed that problem solving discourages and forcing encourages being a perpetrator of bullying 6 months later. Particularly conflict management styles reflecting power or revealing a high concern for the own goals combined with a low concern for the other party's goals escalate into being a perpetrator of bullying behaviours. Our results underline the Dual Concern Theory's added value in further understanding the bullying phenomenon. Second, our finding that one can prevent workplace bullying by certain reactions to conflicts may provide some valuable leads for organizations that wish to pursue a policy against workplace bullying. Specifically, organizations may stimulate problem-solving conflict behaviour and discourage forcing as a way to solve conflicts. This may, for example, be accomplished by specific training sessions for managers and their employees on how to deal with conflicts and by stressing the importance of addressing conflicts in a cooperative instead of a competitive way. Stressing the importance of problem solving is important, as other studies revealed that managers who intervene in conflicts mainly rely on problem solving and forcing techniques (Conlon, Carnevale, & Murnighan, 1994); with the latter, as indicated in this study, potentially giving rise to bullying. Another possibility is to develop a scheme or a protocol that specifies who to contact in case of conflict in order to get the conflict solved in a satisfactory way, potential interveners primarily being the line management, HR

professionals, or more specialized consultants, coaches, or mediators.

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